

**Testimony before the US Commission on Religious Freedom  
Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Iran  
Presented by Marjan Keypour Greenblatt, Founder & Director of ARAM-Iran  
January 26, 2023**

**Introduction:**

Esteemed Commissioners, Special Rapporteur Javed Rahman, I want to thank you for this opportunity to provide you with an update on the status of Iran's minorities since the murder of Mahsa Amini. Since my last testimony before this audience, we have seen a continuation of mass arrests, violent crackdown of protesters, grueling accounts of rape, sexual assault, and torture in detention, and most recently the death sentences and execution of protesters.

Despite the brutality and violence displayed by the regime, the citizens have not stopped their protests but have rather evolved their expressions of unrest. In addition to their presence in the streets, Iranians across the country have engaged in alternative protest forms by chanting slogans from their windows and balconies, slogan writing on walls and street signs, engaging in labor strikes and continued social media presence with hashtags and personal accounts.

According to the most updated reports, as of today, 19,571 arrests were reported, 527 deaths, including 4 executions, since September 17. This includes the deaths of 71 children and 168 arrested children. These numbers represent all Iranians who have participated in the protests from all regions and all sectors of the country. Indeed, the entire nation has suffered and mourned unbearable losses.

While the religious minorities have not officially organized protests, based on the reports of arrests it appears that individuals from various groups have been present on the scenes with their brothers and sisters. In today's testimony I will be speaking about the impact of this movement and the regime crackdown on the country's minorities, with the knowledge that my colleagues will focus more on the condition of the Baha'i community in further detail.

**General Assessment:**

Based on our assessment, during this period, the Iranian regime once again utilized its policy of division and suppression among the minorities. When the protest movement proved to be a unifying force among members of ethnic and religious minorities from four corners of the country, the regime stepped in to pressure the minority members into their roles of expressing public loyalty to the regime and vouching for the regime's treatment of minorities. Leadership of the [Assyrian](#), Armenian, Jewish and [Zoroastrian](#) communities issued harshly worded [statements](#) condemning the protesters and expressing their allegiance to the regime. The similar tone, message, and timing of the statements suggest that the leadership of these communities were asked by higher authorities to provide these directives to their communities. Pressure on religious minorities to condemn the protests, represents the regime's pattern of instrumentalization of minorities.

Despite the pressures, it appears that religious minorities have participated in the widespread protests in Iran and are paying a price for it. Those arrested include [5 Jews](#) who were since released conditionally, at least 7 members of the [Yarsan](#) community who remain behind bars, and least 7 Gonabadi Dervishes have been arrested including one member who was released recently and two members who are believed to be kidnapped as of last night. An Assyrian woman was arrested because of her social media posts in support of the protesters and released subsequently. An Armenian female protester who was arrested in October has shared a heartbreaking [testimony](#) of her time in prison where she suffered the humiliation of physical inspections and was mocked for her Armenian accent and her religious beliefs. Christians also experienced arrests during Christmas celebrations.

Members of the Bahai community continue to pay a hefty price for their mere existence in Iran, their homeland and birthplace of their religion. The actual number of the detainees is fluctuating but at least 17 previous detainees remain behind bars and at least 5 new arrests were reported in January, according to [IranWire](#). The re-arrests and the recent resentencing of Bahai leaders, Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi to hefty prison terms raise more questions and confusion by any logic. My colleagues will elaborate more on the condition of the Bahai community.

### **Impact on the Baluch Population**

Permit me to say a few words on the impact of the protests on the ethnic Baluch population, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims. For the 16th consecutive week, Sunni Baluch people convened for the Friday prayers at the Grand Mosala prayer hall in Zahedan only to encounter armed crackdown by the uniform and plainclothes forces. Following the prayers, many worshipers including children participated in spontaneous protests and were quickly encountered with indiscriminate firing of bullets. On what became known as “Bloody Friday,” at least 96 including 16 children and an 80-year-old woman. Many more were reportedly injured and didn’t seek hospital help, fearing that they would be reported to the authorities.

But the protests haven't stopped and neither have the repressive measures. In addition to deploying uniform and plainclothes guards, the regime has recently introduced checkpoints at different locations of the region. At least 15 checkpoints have been reported. Citizens conducting their ordinary affairs have to pass through checkpoints where they have reportedly experienced humiliating searches and inspections, and were forced to show documentation and ID. We have to keep in mind that in this particular region obtaining IDs and legal documentation has been a longstanding challenge, due to discriminatory practices and arbitrary requirements including DNA tests— a process that is costly and cumbersome for a region that has been perpetually neglected in infrastructure and where at least ⅔ of the population is under the poverty line.

In addition, we have obtained reports of increased internet monitoring of the region, as well as suspicion of surveillance of citizens' private conversations and activities— an ironic gesture for a

government that refuses to acknowledge the cries and demands of the civilians but clandestinely monitors the citizens' activities.

Arrests, detentions, and executions that were already common practice in the region have continued and escalated. We also received the astonishing report of the [execution](#) of at least 90 Baluch individuals in the last 4 months on the basis of various charges.

The continued arrests take a toll on the entire families. These men and boys are often the sole breadwinners of their families and struggling from the systematic cycle of poverty and unemployment in the region. When their stories are told, there are heartbreaking accounts of torture, sexual assault of women and girls, and forced confessions.

Friday Imam Molavi Abdolhamid who was once a figure that the regime could count on for garnering Baluch support for the regime, has become one of the most outspoken advocates of the Baluch people— a direction that has cost him many threats and intimidation initiatives from the regime. According to Iran International the regime has recently threatened to arrest him and destroy the Makki Mosque where he appears on for the popular public prayers on Fridays.

In late November, a [hactivist](#) group known as Black Reward released audio-files attributed to conversations among the highest levels of the Iranian government revealed heated discussion about how to handle the Sunni Baluch Imam. In the audio file the deputy commander of the paramilitary Basij, Ghasem Ghoreishi evaluated options at hand to quell the leadership of Imam and concluded that delegitimizing Molavi Abodlhamid through reputational attacks would be a better option. These audiofiles were initially released on Iran International and have since been widely shared in Persian-language media.

Today is Thursday and the Baluch people are anticipating another spate of arrests and crackdown as they prepare to participate in Friday prayers tomorrow. We know that the protests will continue in Iran, in one form or another. But my message to you is to continue to be an ally and a voice for the persecuted people who fear to express their ideas, wishes, and religious beliefs. We hope that you will continue to:

- 1) Hold the regime accountable for their crimes by imposing sanctions on the highest levels of the regime;
- 2) Continue to support internet access and other communication tools
- 3) Limit the regime's access to funds and instead support Iranian people through humanitarian funds
- 4) Continue to isolate Iran in diplomatic arena
- 5) Maintain a focus on human rights issues in any negotiation or policies involving Iran
- 6) Consider new and comprehensive policies beyond JCPOA